Diving into Reading

Toys come alive, kids explore the arts and sciences, and animals keep the world safe in new books for beginning readers.

March of the Mini Beasts

Hopper brings a wealth of humor to this series opener about three Hispanic second-graders nicknamed the Data Set, thanks to their science-minded smarts and taste for adventure. After Gabe Martinez, Laura Reyes, and Cesar Moreno meet a quirky scientist, Dr. Benson, while selling chocolate bars for the school’s science club, one of the man’s inventions brings several animal toys to life, including a stegosaurus. Ricks’s pencil illustrations amplify the story’s freewheeling energy as the kids try to wrangle the fast-growing animals, and a time-travel cliffhanger ending will leave readers reaching for the sequel, Don’t Disturb the Dinosaurs, available simultaneously. Ages 5–9. Illustrator’s agent: Minju Chang, Bookstop Literary. (Apr.)

Waylon! One Awesome Thing

Pennypacker shifts attention from Clementine to one of the popular character’s fourth-grade classmates, science-loving Waylon Zakowski, in this first book in a spin-off series. Through Waylon’s rational perspective, Pennypacker offers smart insights into the frustration of realizing that life isn’t entirely in one’s control—with his classmates dividing themselves into “teams” and his older sister embracing a new Goth identity, Waylon feels like he’s living his own version of the Big Bang (“Everything in his universe was exploding away in different directions”). Waylon’s insecurities, bigheartedness, and awe of the world at large should easily endear him to readers. Art not seen by PW. Ages 6–8. Agent: Steven Malk, Wernick & Pratt Agency. Available simultaneously: Waylon Strikes Back, Splat! To the Rescue. Ages 7–9. (Apr.)

Danger! Tiger Crossing

Ten-year-old Tiger Brooks and his neighbor, Luna Lopez, get up-close and personal with Henri Rousseau’s “Tiger in a Tropical Storm” in this action-driven first book in the Fantastic Frame series. Soon after Tiger and Luna meet their reclusive elderly neighbor, Viola Dots, they get sucked into a copy of the painting—whose tiger immediately starts hunting them down. Kallis’s background in film and TV animation is evident in her dramatic color images of the children’s Jonny Quest-esque jungle escapades, and the closing sequence paves the way for a Seurat-based sequel, Splat! Another Messy Monday, available simultaneously. A closing note offers information about Rousseau and his work. Ages 7–9. (Apr.)

Fluffy Strikes Back

Spires returns to the world of her Binky series in a spin-off graphic novel that gleefully toys with action/spy movie conventions. Sgt. Fluffy Vandermere, a gruff Persian cat, oversees the subterranean headquarters of Pets of the Universe Ready for Space Travel (PURST), keeping Earth safe from alien insects. Deadpan narration mixes with pet-centric comedy as Fluffy fights back after the headquarters is breached: “They’ve taken hostages! And they’re torturing them!” writes Spires as invading flies spritz PURST operatives with water from a spray bottle. Crisp cartooning, a sharp sense of humor, and the lovably brusque sarge should make this a hit with Spires’s fans. Ages 7–10. (Apr.)

Kabungo

With dry humor, a 10-year-old girl named Beverly narrates her episodic adventures with her 10-year-old best friend, Kabungo, who lives in a cave on Main Street. Rolli doesn’t dwell on how or why, exactly, a cavegirl ended up living in Star City—readers are just meant to accept it, as the town’s residents have done. Wisely, Rolli avoids giving Kabungo a stereotypical Neanderthal dialect; she sounds more like a toddler (she calls Beverly “Belly,” tiger is “targur”), playing into the sisterly way Beverly tries to teach her friend the alphabet and otherwise look after her. It’s a warm and rewarding account of a very unconventional friendship. Ages 7–10. (Apr.)

The Mysterious Moonstone

After discovering a secret library at their elementary school, friends Evan and Cleo are transported into a mystery novel, where they come to the aid of the detective trying to solve the case. Beyond being an entertaining time-travel adventure (the caper is a Holmesian affair set in 19th-century England), Luper’s story is an enlightening introduction to the tricks and tropes of the mystery genre, from red herrings and falling chandeliers to butlers who may or may not have done it. Art not seen by PW. Available simultaneously: The Spy’s Secret. Ages 7–10. Author’s agent: Linda Pratt, Wernick & Pratt Agency. Illustrator’s agent: Justin Rucker, Shannon Associates. (Apr.)